Guidelines:
Public Participation in Land Planning

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Preface

The Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing has endorsed these guidelines for public participation. They are designed to describe the fundamental considerations in the management of a public participation process and provide a list of the simple "do's and don'ts" of the process.

The guidelines have been prepared to clarify the nature of public participation in the land planning process of the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing and establish a common base of expectations for the results of the process.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is intended primarily as a guide for Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing staff when developing a process for public involvement in planning projects.

The paper is, however, only a guide; clear thinking is required if the ideas of this paper are to be successfully applied. The thinking and planning about process and product which is a prerequisite to the initiation of any planning project must also be directed to the public involvement portion of that process.

II. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION - DEFINITION AND DISCUSSION

Public participation is that process by which citizens who are concerned with a planning area share their knowledge, reveal their values, and express their concerns as an integral part of planning rather than reacting to decisions of government after they are made.

The attitude an agency takes toward citizen participation is likely to be highly influential upon the outcome of the citizen participation endeavour. If the agency desires to achieve meaningful public involvement, and if it provides adequate manpower and financial support, then over time a foundation can be developed for effective citizen participation. This "seed time" may be lengthy but without it the public participation effort may later collapse because of insufficient preparation, depth and commitment.

In the past, frequently the term "public participation" carried with it negative connotations for many citizens. People were consulted after decisions were made or more often, merely informed that decisions had been made. In such circumstances, they often responded to this approach angrily. Their anger may have been expressed through organized protest, litigation or through more disorganized, spontaneous expressions. For these reasons, many people and some officials came to distrust the term "citizen participation".

Well managed citizen participation can contribute to better decisions. There is a need at the initiation of the planning project to develop a strategy for citizen participation that is relevant in allowing the public to contribute valuable input to the exercise.

III. WHY INVOLVE THE PUBLIC IN THE PLANNING PROCESS?

When the public are actively involved it is reasonable to expect that the resulting plan will be responsive to the widest public need and receive support in implementation.

Some of the advantages of involving citizens in a planning process are outlined as follows:

1) Citizens who are familiar with the planning area can correct errors or omissions in the data which is collected by planners.

2) The open discussion of problems and issues can create an atmosphere of mutual understanding among opposing groups and sometimes contribute to the resolution of conflicts.

3) Citizens who are involved in a planning process can often produce creative ideas which may not occur to planners who are restricted by professional biases or conventional wisdom.

4) People who are actively involved in an open planning process will generally be committed to the completed plan.

5) Public participation contributes to an efficient and cost-effective way of public decision-making. Frederick Thayer, in a paper written for the Ontario Committee on Government Productivity puts it this way:

> ".....While conventional wisdom argues that participation slows down decision processes, adds to the overall cost and design of implementation, and introduces a host of irrelevant factors, participation may do precisely the opposite. Most decision-making studies never examine the costs of overcoming consequences not foreseen in advance. There can be no better way of discovering these unforeseen consequences, long a major problem of administration, than by involving in the decision processes those likely to be affected by them. A slower decision can become economical over the long term." (Thayer, 1972)

IV. THE START UP

The stages of the public participation process, in relation to the overall planning process, should be determined at the initiation of the project. Before the project is publicly announced, there should be a public participation start-up phase. This phase should include activities such as:

- Recruit, select and orient planning staff and members of the planning team.
- Collect data about the socio-economic and demographics of the area to be planned.
- Prepare public participation mailing list, which would include such agencies as cattlemen's associations, tourist associations, and affected landowners. Mailing list may also include other local, regional, provincial or national agencies of this type.
- Prepare a list of media contacts for distributing news releases.
- Prepare a list of local, regional, provincial and federal elected representatives in the planning area.
- Prepare a list of contacts for each municipality in the planning area.
- Develop the terms of reference and schedule for the planning exercise.
- Select the method or combination of methods to be used for public participation and develop the program in conjunction with the schedule for the planning process.
- Prepare a distribution list of ministry staff, and staff of other ministries, to receive public participation and plan documents.
- Prepare the initial news release and/or brochure about the project for public distribution.

V. A SUMMARY OF METHODS FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1) Public Meetings

This is the most frequently used method of participation and in many instances, one of the least effective. Public meetings are usually quite formal affairs where the public listen to a presentation by the planning agency and response is in the form of briefs from interest groups and speeches from vocal members of the public. There is seldom satisfactory two-way communication and the view of the general public is difficult to evaluate.

2) Informal contacts with Influential Citizens

This is a very important form of participation where planning areas are small and the numbers of interested people are small. Key people of the planning area are knowledgeable, respected by the general public and have the power to influence decisions in their area. In fact, if they are not consulted, the plan will likely fail. It is important, however, that this technique be balanced with other methods to ensure that the process retains integrity.

3) Newspapers, Radio and T.V.

This is a one-way form of communication and generally quite impersonal. Response is usually limited to those citizens who are motivated and capable of replying by letter.

The news media are important for advising the public of the planning program, the issues, and of the various opportunities for them to participate.

4) Workshops

Workshops are small group discussions which can result in excellent two-way communication. Depending on the participants, the workshop can be of moderate to high value to the planning process. This technique is most valuable in situations where the planner has good communication skills and those attending are well informed, respected and represent a cross-section of the interests in the planning area.

5) Special Meetings (Including Local Government)

In this method the responsible managers meet with various interested parties or groups. Two-way communication is possible in this approach but there may be no opportunity for opposing views to be heard. If the planners recognize any bias of the particular groups, this method can be moderately effective.

6) Advisory Boards

Advisory committees or boards can be a most useful means of achieving public participation. If the terms of reference are clear and responsible and knowledgeable people are selected, this method may be rated highly. If those factors do not exist, they can be disastrous. As a rule they should be appointed by the Minister and report to the Minister. If they report to someone in the bureaucracy, their public credibility is lowered and they may not be assured that their views are adequately represented to the politicians. Advisory boards can be very costly and require a great deal of staff time to administer.

7) Information Centres

This is a popular and informal method which is quite effective since it places each participant on an equal footing. People are encouraged to access the centre at their leisure to view displays about the planning project and are encouraged to respond with thoughts and concerns. This method is often combined with the use of interviews or questionnaires.

8) Survey Questionnaires or Interviews

This is a relatively inexpensive method of determining public views. It is most effective when the issues are very clear and well understood by the public. Otherwise, it may not be very effective because of the relative rigidity of the questionnaire and the possibility of interviewer bias. In most cases, this involves one-way communication only. It does, however, have the strong advantage of lending itself to clear quantifiable evaluation. It is a method which has merit when used in combination with other methods.

9) Referenda

This approach is seldom used as part of a land management and planning exercise since it permits the respondent to indicate a yes or no answer to an issue e.g. - capital punishment, neighbourhood parks etc.

This is quasi-legislative and only occasionally used.

Note: Most successful public participation programs for land management and planning are based upon a well conceived combination of methods, rather than one method alone.

VI. AN EVALUATION OF VARIOUS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION METHODS

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION METHOD	DESCRIPTIVE DIMENSIONS*				
	Focus				
	Scope No. of People	Specificity	Degree of Two-Way Communication	Level of Citizen Activity Required	Agency Staff Time
Public Meetings	M	L	L	H	M
Informal Contacts with Influential Citizens	L	H	H	M	M
Newspapers, Radio, and TV	H	L	L	L	L
Workshops	L	H	H	H	H
Special Meetings	M	H	H	H	H
Advisory Boards	L	H	H	H	H
Information Centres	M	H	H	H	M
Questionnaires /Interviews	M	H	L	M	M
Referendums	H	M	L	L	M

H - High Degree
M - Medium Degree
L - Low Degree

* Effectiveness of various methods

VII. DEALING WITH PUBLIC BRIEFS AND SUBMISSIONS

Each written submission received during the public participation program should be duplicated in sufficient numbers the for members of the planning team to have access for reference. Also, all of the names and addresses of those who made submissions should be checked against the public participation mailing list. Any new individuals or groups should be recorded for the next public participation mailing.

Within a few days following the receipt of each submission, a letter (form letter if volume warrants) should be used to acknowledge the submission and provide information about the next stage of the planning process.

All submissions should be available to the general public for reference. Any verbal briefs submitted at meetings or workshops should be recorded and a transcript made. At the conclusion of the planning process, all submissions received should be indexed and duplicated to comprise a permanent written record of the submission. Copies should be placed in both Regional and Lands Division libraries.

When the plan options have been developed and public input has been received, both the options and the public input should be summarized and evaluated for consideration by government. Managers are not to discuss or present any options to the public as preferred or selected options. Options should be discussed with the public in terms of the pros and cons of each with no specific or preferred option identified.

VIII. PRESS RELATIONS DURING THE PLANNING & PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The importance of the media and their effective employment in the planning process warrants a brief discussion.

The Press

The function of the newspaper is the dissemination of news that will attract readers. There are three major classifications of newspapers, namely: weeklies, local dailies, and national dailies. The weeklies have a greater interest in local news, the dailies combine this with varying degrees of national and international coverage. Every newspaper is greatly interested in news items affecting its immediate area.

There are two modes of communication with the public through the press - the news release and the advertisement. (Both of these can be used in broadcasting as well.) The first is free of charge - the only requirement is newsworthiness. Advertisements can be costly but have two very distinct advantages. Their size and appearance are set by the Ministry. The content is prepared by the Ministry and appears exactly as written. Standard design specifications for advertisements are available from Information Services Branch. The news release, depending upon the editor's view of its interest level, may not be used, or be relegated to the back pages. The news release is more frequently used on the front pages by weeklies.

For purposes of public participation in land planning both the news release and advertisement can be employed. Normally a press release should precede an advertisement by more than a week to improve local awareness. The news release should indicate that more details will be made available in a forthcoming advertisement. The advertisement should appear about four or five days before the event is to occur.

Get to know editors of local weekly newspapers in your region. They are, as a rule, opinion leaders within communities and their early awareness of the public participation program and its objectives, is often beneficial to the process.

Consider the following suggestions for the preparation of news releases related to land planning and public participation:

1) For each project, establish the level of approval for news releases at each stage of the process i.e. usually the Regional Director, sometimes the A.D.M. or D.M.

2) Keep release short and simple.

3) Answer the questions, who? what? where? when? and why?

4) Use familiar words, not government jargon.

5) Keep paragraphs and sentences short.

6) Quote the Minister or other official in the second paragraph.

7) Select the most significant point for the lead paragraph and follow with other points in declining order of importance.

8) Include a name, address and telephone number of official contact for further information.

9) Have the release approved as per item 1 above before issuing it to the media.

10) Ensure that the release is supplied to the news editor at least three days prior to its expected date of appearance. Check with the editor on his or her deadlines.

11) Use of electronic media such as community TV channels can be effective and should be considered if available.

IX. EVALUATION OF PUBLIC INPUT

Citizens who take the time to share their knowledge of the planning area, express their values and highlight their concerns deserve to be told how their input will be conveyed to the government decision makers. Without clear assurance to the public in this regard the public participation process will appear to be lacking in integrity.

Prior to the initiation of a planning project, during the development of an approach to public participation, the question of evaluation of input should be addressed. It may often be advisable to choose a combination of methods, one which lends itself to relatively simple evaluation (e.g. questionnaire) combined with one or more which require a more subjective evaluation (e.g. workshops or information centres).

In short:

1) When deciding which public participation methods to be used consider the ease of evaluation.

2) When conducting public participation take every contributor seriously and keep meticulous records, either written or recorded.

There is no standard format for the evaluation report. It should normally be written in a form which will enable its inclusion as an appendix in the final Crown land plan. Therefore it should be brief; generally it should not exceed five typewritten pages. It should include the methods used, dates and places of activity, numbers and types of citizens and special interest groups who participated, major issues identified, and a brief explanation of the degree to which the public input is reflected in the plan options. Do not permit the numbers in quantitative approaches, to unjustifiably bias the nature of public input. Objectively address in narrative form any observable biases which might be reflected by numbers. Likewise, present any inclination for concensus or compromise which become evident in the public participation program. Reporting should reflect all the viewpoints presented. All public input should go forward for consideration in the decision making process.

In conclusion, the evaluation report must demonstrate the level of integrity which was addressed in the first paragraph of this section. The evaluation report should be written so that any public participant would read it and subscribe to its fair representation of the facts, opinions, and values contributed by the public during the process.

X. SOME COMMON ERRORS MADE BY MANAGERS IN PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Examples of errors are as follows:

1) Initiating a planning process without full consideration of a public participation program and schedule.

2) Neglecting to budget for public participation.

3) Grossly underestimating the time required for public participation.

4) Initiating public participation as an "afterthought" very late in the process.

5) Requesting input from the public on choices or options without providing adequate supporting information.

6) Forgetting to evaluate the public input and further neglecting to provide this evaluation to the decision makers.

7) Confusing the factual and analytical portion of the process with the public input by establishing planning teams which include members of the public and representatives of interest groups along with planners.

8) Forgetting to adequately inform the media of the plan, issues, and approach to public participation.

9) Forgetting to inform the local M.L.A. or other important local elected officials.

10) Since advisory boards are generally accountable to the Minister, it is not necessary that they include public service staff whose advice is in any event available to the Minister.

11) Failing to carefully record public involvement so that it can be summarized and evaluated.

XI. ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Public involvement in the land planning process is the interface between the technical and democratic processes of our society. Consequently, the authorization of the process must involve those with a direct public accountability: the Minister and Executive.

In a decentralized public institution such as the Ministry of Lands, Parks and Housing the authorization process inevitably involves several levels in the organization. A general outline of responsibilities and procedures is provided below.

The Regional Director is responsible for the initiation and completion of land plans. The priorities for planning are established at the broad level through an annual statement of program directives issued by the Ministry Executive. In response to these proposals the region responds with specific planning proposals. The terms of reference that are established for planning projects include a proposal for the involvement of the public.

The Land Programs Branch plays a key staff role in this process. On the one hand, the Branch provides support to the regions in the development of terms of reference for a planning project. This assistance can involve the review and selection of the most appropriate public involvement and planning process. On the other hand, the Branch provides support to the Executive in the review of proposed terms of reference and seeks the appropriate executive level approval.

These general procedures and responsibilities, while they require time and clear thinking prior to action, are designed to ensure that a manageable and accountable process is initiated as an integral part of the land planning process.

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